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Turning Point

On March 11, 1938 Germany annexed Austria and at that moment my sheltered life ended, never again to be the same.
For the last five years Hitler and his cohorts had implemented laws in Germany which allowed and even encouraged outrages against the Jewish population. From taking away their jobs, their possessions to taking away their life, everything was allowed. It was a "free for all" but the Jews. During these years the situation had worsened in Austria, as anti-semitism was rising to new hights and was shown more openly than before. For hundreds of years it had been high, but never the less Jews were very successful and part of the tapestry of the country. Alfred Polar, a famous German Jewish writer said:" The Germans make good Nazis, but lousy antisemites. The Austrians make lousy Nazis, but what first class anti semites they are."
That was the situation I woke up to on March 11. I was 20 years old, the pampered daughter of a wealthy family. My father was a successful layer, my mother a lady of leisure, my 12 year old brother a brat.
Everything changed when Hitler fulfilled his dreamto incorporate his "homeland Austria" where he was born into the German Reich. The morning the German troops crossed the border into Austria they were received with open arms. We were not aware of the fact that for years the Nazi Party had infiltrated Austria, whwre they were considered illegal,had trained men, supplied them with uniforms nad Nazi paraphernalia and had indoctrinated them."You will be part of the big German Reich where you belong instead of your small Austria".It was done very quietly although from time to time we would hear about some incidents and we did not heed the signs.
It therefore came as a shock to us, that within hours the streets were full of marching and shouting men in brown Nazi uniforms, with swastika armbands, singing Nazi songs, specially their favorite song "When Jewish blood flows from our knives". Suddenly huge banners with the Nazi insignia were hanging from all the official buildings and many private ones too.
Radio Austria was taken over in the early morning hours and the reports happily described the well come the German troups received. We listened all day, were afraid to leave our apartment and were constantly on the phone with family and friends to find out what happened in other parts of the city. At that time Vienna had one million eight hundred thousand inhabitants of which approximately two hundred and twenty thousand were Jewish. There were two districts were many Jews lived, but we were scattered all over the city. As in most cities the location of one's home depends mostly on economic circumstances.
What had taken five years to implement in Germany was done at once in Austria. Nazis immediately bothered Jews and two of them showed up at our apartment that same morning. The butcher across the street had told them about my mother's jewelry. We had hidden it immediately in the toilet tank in the bathroom. My mother showed them the ring she always wore, which was mother's engagement ring and asked innocently : "Doesn't every woman have an engagement ring?" They let her keep the ring which would not ha happened a few days later.

That Saturday was a horrible day for us Jews in Vienna. The Nazis herded thousands of us to the center of the city, made them kneel on the pavement and scrub the streets and sidewalks with toothbrushes. Many of these innocent people were dressed in their best clothes on their way to services. The water in the buckets was laced with Clorox and after a while the fingers of these poor people started bleeding, which absolutely delighted the masses of onlookers who had joined the spectacle.
Again we were too scared to leave the house. Little did we know that that this was just the beginning of our troubles.

Karla Stept Jan 6, 1999

Turning Point (cont.)

It was a rude awakening for most of us. The unthinkable had happened. One week after the fateful Annexation my father was disbarred and had no means of income and we had to consider emigration seriously.

Leaving the place where I was born, where my life had been so good and held so many promises was terrible. I was angry, full of hatred for those people who were taking all that away from me, only because I was Jewish and they considered us an inferior race. Even after sixty years, I am still bitter and unforgiving.

Nevertheless, at that time life continued for me. I went back to classes at a special school to become a milliner. My father believed in educating his daughter to be independent and so I had to follow two carriers. I had already finished my degree as al English teacher for private schools and was scheduled to take additional credits to be able to teach at public schools. It never happened. However, I also had to learn something practical and that was millinery. In Vienna, it took five years to get a master in millinery and I was only in second year. In milliner school, we were only three Jewish girls and the first day after the Annexation the teacher told us:

"You three sit in that corner of the classroom away from the others."

We obeyed, the other girls grinned. They must have believed that being Jewish was contagious and so they treated us like pariahs. I would like to mention that before the Annexation we never had any problems with our schoolmates.

Around that time, one of the scariest things happened to me. We three girls were walking home after school, when suddenly two brown shirts confronted us.

"Jewish? "They asked.

"Yes" we answered.

"Then you on the left and you on the right come with us, you in the middle can go home."

I was the one in the middle. We never again heard of the two girls. They disappeared, as did so many others. I was spared my number was not up. The next day I returned to class to sit alone in the corner. None of my classmates asked about my two friends, they did not want to know.

A few weeks later school was over and escape was uppermost on our minds. Little did I know that I would travel halfway around the globe and that it would take me twenty years to settle down in the United States.

Our life had changed drastically. Rumors were in the air.

"Did you hear, they are leaving for America?"

"Have you ever heard of Paraguay?"

" Imagine a, he stood in line in front of the American Consulate, the truck drove up and the Nazis filled it with those waiting and took them away."

" Mr. Meyer had to sign over his factory, not only did he get nothing for it, they beat him up terribly, went to his house and the family got 2 hours to pack and leave. Now the Nazis lives in his beautiful house."

Affidavit, quota number, visas. Suddenly it was important to have family overseas, who could send you one of those cherished lifesaving affidavits. Nevertheless, there, one had to get a quota number and there were precious few. Then you had to wait until your number was called. So many desperate people for so few numbers. The lines in front of all the consulates grew longer. Nobody wanted us. Sometimes ~~one~~ a person could get a

visa for special professions. England started kindertransports (children under 15 years) who were then educated by Jewish families. It was heartbreaking to see parents and children separated under these conditions. Many never saw each other again.

In the meantime, one had to get all the necessary papers to leave Austria. Passport, a certificate from the Tax department, that one did not owe taxes, a police certificate that one had never broken the law, permission to pack and send your furniture. If you had a destination and still had your furniture and lived in your house or apartment one would use that permit. At that early date mostly men were arrested, especially those who owned factories or stores, so that some of the employees could take them over for nothing. They called "racial cleansing" and they still do it in many places.

So that my father would not have to get these papers, I went. Maybe we did not realize what could have happened to me. Slowly friends around us disappeared. Some left the country others were taken away. My boyfriend left with his parents for Yugoslavia where he had a rich uncle. The Nazis took their factory, but let them leave. My best girlfriend and her mother left for Australia, where she had an uncle. My father gave them a large amount of money to get a visa to Australia, but we never heard from them again.

Then one day the Gestapo came to pick up my farther. We had a very large apartment where all the rooms faced the garden and while our maid, speaking very loudly, told the men that my farther was not home, he escaped through the garden. As they could not arrest him, they took my mother and me to Gestapo headquarters where the interrogated me for 3 hours. When they finished and led me out of the room, my mother who had been waiting outside, and we looked at each other not knowing if we would ever see each other again. At that moment, I saw my father and two policemen coming towards me and I ran and threw myself into his arms crying. A miracle had happened. My father seeing from the other side of the street that we had been taken away, went to the police, who at that time, hated the interference of the Nazis, specially the undermining of their power by the Gestapo. Knowing my father, they decided to accompany him to the Gestapo. When my father asked the man in charge what the accusation was, they found out that there was none. It was a private incident caused by a man who had lost a case against my father and who now belonged to the Gestapo.

My father's courage to go to the police saved us and we were one of the few who was released by the Gestapo unharmed. After that experience, we did not sleep in our apartment anymore, as the Gestapo generally came during the night to take people away.

One of my father's clients turned out to be a high official in the Nazi's hierarchy who had their special Jew and some were saved because of this special relationship. Knowing of my mother's jewelry and the need to get it out of the country, he offered to send his trusted secretary to Italy to give it to a Rabbi. My father accepted and so she left. After 5 days, she and the jewelry were back. The Rabbi had gone on vacation and she was afraid to leave it with somebody else.

A few days later my father accidentally met a former school friend and that man offered him baptism certificates issued by the Church of England to help Jews get into countries who would only give visas to Catholics. They were very expensive, but they saved our lives. The Anglican Church did not only issue these certificates, but they also left the eight of 1938 open in such a way that it looked like a three. This way we could go to Italy. However, other things had to be accomplished before. We got four steamship tickets to Australia, because one could only go to Italy in transit. We asked for and got permission to have the content of our apartment packed into a liftvan, which is a very large wooden crate. As this was considered 'export', we had to pay a stiff tax to take our own belongings. A man from the Tax department came to calculate the Tax and he decided if pictures, silver, carpets, etc. were of special value. We were not allowed to take those, but never the less had to pay the tax on them. Money did not mean anything anymore, as we had to leave the country with two suitcases each and ten marks in cash (four dollars). The rest was confiscated. Therefore, my father gave everything away, especially to his 86 year old father, whom he had supported for many years.

To be continued...

Karla Stept January 16,1999

Turning Point (cont.)

So we were lucky ones, my parents, my 12-year-old brother and I left for Vienna on Aug. 7, 1938. My father's client took us to the train station, dressed in uniform, to avoid difficulties. He bought an armful of roses and admonished us.

"Do not hide anything in the flowers, as the Gestapo will search for jewelry and money at he border"

We had two sleeper compartments, one for my parents, one for my brother and me. During the night, we reached the Austrian-Italian border and the Gestapo went from compartment to compartment. I heard them enter my parents compartment and asking loudly.

" Do you have any jewelry or money"

"No, we don't" my father answered.

They ripped the flowers apart, and went though all of their belongings. They even emptied the tube of toothpaste to see if anything was hidden inside.

Then they preceded to our compartment and loudly started to ask my questions. "Please, not so loud" I said "my little brother is sleeping in the upper bunk." They looked at me very astonished, being used to scare people and there I was, a young girl, telling them to be quieter.

They looked at our passports and took letters out form my purse I had next to my bunk.

"Who wrote these letters"

"My boyfriend did"

"Where is he?"

"He lives in Yugoslavia"

They read only one letter and realized that it was a love letter, threw all of them on my bed and banging the door, they left.

Then another miracle had happened. I carried my mother's jewelry on my body under my pajamas. I still cannot understand that my father risked my life. They would have taken me off the train and shot me. But I never questioned him.

And so we escaped into Italy and saved our life. We left 18 family members behind of which only five survived. My 86 year old grandfather was taken away after Kristallnacht and died in Buchenwald concentration camp. Uncle Karl, his wife and two sons escaped to France and ended up in one of the camps near Paris. He and his younger son Willy survived; his wife and older son were shipped to Ausschwitz. He died soon after the end of the war and Willy ended up in Israel. Uncle Salo and Aunt Hanja escaped separately to England. He got one of the separate visas, as he was a doctor-they sent him to the coalmine district where he lived for some years. His wife Hanja escaped to England as a maid. Uncle Herman, his wife, and daughter disappeared. My niece Ruth 12 years old left with one of the children's transports to England. Her parents disappeared. My mother's family lived in Poland. Her mother, brother, and his family were shot, together with many others from the same town at the beginning of September 1939. Today only, my cousin Ruth and I are alive.

When I returned to Vienna in 1958, the Jewish Community Center gave me the exact date when my grandfather died in the camp, as the Germans kept details statistics. We had it engraved on my grandmothers grave stone, who luckily had already died in 1937.

Before leaving Vienna, we heard from friends about a small place on the Italian coast near the French border. We made reservations in a small boarding house, settled there, and waited. The place is called Ospedaletti Ligure and is beautiful. Our minds were certainly not on vacationing, but there was nothing else we could do. We were in limbo, away from home, which never again would be home not knowing were we would be able to go and always in fear that the Italian police might send us back. They had come just a few days after our arrival, questioned my father as to the circumstances of our stay and wear very polite. They were satisfied with our explanations that we had passage booked to go to Australia and were waiting for our visa. During the time we stayed there, they would salute us and inquire about our health. They spoke some German, a little bit of French and I learned some Italian. The son of the owners of our hotel who was waiting to be ordained had time to teach me Italian and was eager to have female company. I do not think he ever made a good priest as he was too good looking and liked women too much.

My father had to sell my mothers beautiful pearls so that we had money. For many weeks, nothing happened. Finally, we received a letter from my mother's uncle who lived in the USA informing us that he had sent an affidavit to the American Consulate in Triest. When my father went there, he was told that there were difficulties with Quotas, the insurmountable problem. The U.S. immigration authorities would let my father use the Russian Quota, as his birthplace was a small town on the Austrian-Polish-Russian border and was now Russian territory. At that time Quota numbers were according to the number of immigrants who have arrived in the United States at the beginning of the 20th Century and hundreds of thousand Jews came from Russia. With no immigration from Russia in 1938, my father would be allowed to bring his wife and children less than eighteen years on that Quota. I was 20 and so I could not go. I had to use the Austrian Quota that was over subscribed and it would have taken ten years to get to my number. For one lousy Russian Quota number a family was torn apart at a time were it could mean life or death for the one left behind.

Of course, my parents did not want to leave my stranded. We contacted my boyfriend's uncle in Yugoslavia, who had bought a visa for Hans to go to Argentina. He already had left in September. He bought one for me and we decided that I would go alone to Argentina and Hans and I would get married immediately upon my arrival. My parents and my brother would go to the USA. The stipulation on my visa was that I had to go first class indicated that I was a Tourist with money. My father used two of the four prepaid tickets that he had bought for Australia and reserved passage for me on the "SS Univers" to sail November 10th from Triest. I left two days ahead as the train ride to Triest took eight hours.

Saying good bye to my parents and brother was heartbreaking. We were crying and hugging each other again and again, not knowing when we would see each other again. It must have been even harder on my parents to see their protected daughter leave on her own into a very problematic future. It is always harder for the ones who stay behind and young people believe they are invisible.

As our resources were very limited, my father gave me one hundred lire, and assured me that a friend of his would pick me up at the train station in Triest. He informed me that his wife was away and that he too had to leave. He took me to a small hotel, paid for two nights and left. I was scared, suddenly completely alone with very little money and many problems. The next morning I went to the German consulate to exchange my invalid Austrian passport into a German one.

"Seventy-five lire", the women said not very friendly.

"When can I pick it up?" I asked timidly. After all I was on German territory, could have been taken into custody and returned to Vienna.

"Come back in a week", She barked.

That was the moment when I started to cry uncontrollably. I was not able to speak because I was crying so hard. Suddenly the attitude of the women changed completely. She got up from her chair, took me into her arms and calmed me down. Finally I could explain to her that my ship was sailing the next day, that I had to bring my passport to the Argentinean Consulate to get the visa and then to the office of the steamship company. She understood my plight and my passport was ready at three p.m.

The special visa I got was only valid until June 30th and therefor it had to appear in my passport before that date. My new passport naturally showed the date on November 9th. The Argentinean Consulate forged it by erasing "November" and over typing it with "February" which is the first month before June that has the same number of letters. We the secretary finally gave me my passport with the visa and I saw the corrected date, I exclaimed.

"But in February Austria was still free and I would never have a German passport"

"Take it or leave it!was the short answer." They did not care, they had the money and it was my life that was on the line. I took it.

Now I ran to the offices of the Steamship Company to finalize my passage. All done I finally could relax.

I had just enough money left to buy two rolls for dinner, but knew I would get enough to eat on the ship.

The next morning I took my two suitcases and walked to the pear. Nearly blinded by eyedrops when undergoing Trachoma Examination, I was finally ready to board the beautiful ship that was taking me to freedom.

Karla Stept March 31, 1999

Turning Point (cont.)

A young sailor took my arm and let me across the gangplank of the S/S UNIVERSE, the ship taking me from Triest, Italy to Buenos Aires, Argentina, and to a new chapter of my life.

I had a small inside cabin with a private shower. My two suitcases were already inside. I locked the door, threw myself across the bed sobbing uncontrollably. After the stress of the past days, I just broke down. I was only 20 years old and had never been away from my parents and was suddenly left to fend for myself. I looked at the two suitcases and again started to cry. Their contents were all I had to start a new life, in a strange country and I did not even speak a word of Spanish! The only money I owned was a deposit my father had to make when he purchased my steamship ticket and it could only be used for expenses on board ship. To comply with the visa I had obtained, I had to travel first class, as it was considered a capitalist visa. What a capitalist I was, no money, two suitcases and a fiancé expecting me whom did not even have a job. But I was young and after convincing myself there was nothing I could change, I unpacked. Upon the nightstand, I put the pictures of my parents and 12 year old brother, "the brat" whom I already missed.

The S/S UNIVERSE was a large ocean vessel with all the luxuries. I knew that the 17 days it would take to reach Buenos Aries were to be my last carefree days for a long time, I set out to make the best of a difficult situation. How wonderful it is to be young!

It was my first ocean voyage and the amenities of the ship overwhelmed me. Large dining rooms, sitting rooms, two bars, a ball room, a swimming pool, and a large deck. Naturally, the first class offered a lot, but even the second class public rooms were large and well furnished. The ship had only two classes.

The crew was very helpful and enjoyed ~~to~~ explain everything when they realized that I was so interested. It also helped that I was a twenty-year-old girl and rather good looking.

I was seated at the dinner table with some young people and a couple with their four-year-old son. They adopted me for the duration of the trip and I was very happy about it, as I was feeling terribly lonely. There were two hundred and sixty passengers in first class, one hundred and fifty-six of who were European refugees. We were immigrants. It was the last crossing to reach Argentina in time before the capitalist visas expired on November 30, 1938. We would reach Buenos Aires on November 28th.

The first 24 hours were horrible. Not only did I get sea sick, but I was also desperate. How would I manage without my father's guidance? The next morning, having recovered, I decided to ask to see the Captain and tell him about my visa problem. A few hours later he received me in his quarters. I could not believe my eyes when I saw the size and opulence of his stateroom. The elegance of the furniture and artifacts, the silver and crystal astonished me. The captain, tall and slim, was a gray-haired gentleman with a ruddy complexion. Smilingly he assured me that he spoke German and encouraged me to tell him about my predicament.

"My visa is forged; everybody knows that Hitler annexed Austria in March 1938 and I could not have had a German passport before that date. The Argentinean visa, dated February could not have been in that passport. Here is the passport. You can see for yourself that it is a clumsy forgery". One look and he understood.

"If my fiancé could board the ship before getting to Buenos Aires, could you marry us, so that I would be the wife of a legal immigrant"?

"That would be a good idea," he remarked, "but it would have to be on the high seas. Your fiancé would have to come aboard in Brazil and as a Jew he will never get a visa to that country."

Tears started running down my cheeks. He gave me a handkerchief, got up and came back with a photo.

"Look at it," he commanded. I did and thought that I was looking at my own picture.

"You know, young lady," he said, "this is my youngest daughter, more or less your age and if I know that she had these problems, my heart would break. Relax now; you and I will find a way. Enjoy your trip, I will advise my staff that you are under my protection and you will get special attention."

And this is exactly what happened. Every evening fresh fruit in my cabin, I was seated at the Captain's table many times and he always danced the first dance with me. All the officers were at their best and tried to make this trip memorable. They did, because I still remember their kindness as if it was yesterday.

I also found a way to send the deposit. Not for myself, but for drinks and expenses made by a young English engineer. He worked for a large British company, which owned the train systems in many countries, and he had just finished his job in Egypt and was on his way to inspect the trains in Argentina. He was in his thirties, very reserved and colorless, but he drank a lot. I signed his chits and he gave me the cash. Of course, the purser knew that I was not drinking the whiskey, but he must have gotten orders from the captain to accept the chits signed by me and when we reached Buenos Aires he gave me the balance of the deposit. This was the only money I had when I arrived; it was one hundred and seventy-five dollars.

I enjoyed every minute, as did the other passengers. We swam, we danced, we ate, and we even found time to study some Spanish. The weather was perfect and I did not get seasick again. The first class passengers were ~~aloud~~ allowed to visit the second class facilities when there was nothing going on in first class and so we would go dancing there.

After ten days, we landed for the first time. It was in Recife, Brazil. A group of us went ashore. It was terribly hot and the street and sidewalk cafes were crowded. Most of the people were black. I had never seen black people in Europe. They were loud, tried to get close to the women and touch us. What was awaiting me in Buenos Aires? I also received and upsetting letter form my fiancé telling me that he had started a relationship with a woman he had met on the ship and that we would have to reconsider our marriage plans. There I was, all alone; he was the only person I know in that strange country. If we did not get married and legalize my immigration, I was certain to be sent back and end up in a concentration camp. I decided not to kill myself; there always would be time later on.

We coasted Brazil, landed in Rio de Janeiro were some of the passengers got off, but most of us could not disembark to visit the city for their very strict immigration laws. With sad and longing eyes we admired the port, the beautiful beaches, the Sugar Cone, a hill shapes like a cone, and the tall Christ statue welcoming travelers to Rio, but he did not welcome us.

A few days later the fateful day came. We arrived in Montevideo, Uruguay, just one night's journey from Buenos Aires. The Argentinean immigration official boarded our ship to examine the passports during the night. The next morning found us assembled in the diningroom. They called one passenger after another handed him his stamped passport and he departed. At the end, I was the only one there. The official started to speak in rapid Spanish; he was very angry. I did not understand him. An interpreter was called, and at the same time, the Captain joined us, put his arm around my shoulders to reassure me. He explained to the official that I was a political refugee, had to flee for my life and was to be married immediately. The official called my fiancé, who was waiting at the pier. We fell into each other's arms we were so happy to see each other again. A deal was struck: if I was not married within the 5 days the ship was to stay in port, the Captain guaranteed to pay for my return trip. Only for the interference of that wonderful man, I was spared. So I disembarked and set foot on Argentinean soil, which would be my home for the next twenty years.